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STRANGE TALES
FROM HUMBLE LIFE,
BY JOHN ASHWORTH.

THE LOST CURL.

PUBLISHED BY PERMISSION OF THE AUTHOR.

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NOTE TO THE SECOND SERIES.

THE reader may rest assured these narratives are substantially true, as many persons now living in the neighborhood can testify. The names mentioned are real names, both of persons and places. Some of them, as in the former case, have arisen from my connection with the Chapel for the Destitute.

I am surprised and thankful for the reception given to the first eleven Tales, now constituting the First Volume—nearly half a million of which have been sold in a few months—and the urgent request of many friends that I would furnish them with more, induces me again to dip into my diary, where many more yet remain.

I am a tradesman, and make no pretensions to literary ability. If He whom I desire to serve condescends to use me as a medium of good to others, my earnest wish will be realized. To Him my prayer has been, “**HOLD THOU MY RIGHT HAND.**”

J. ASHWORTH.

Rochdale, 1866.

The Lost Curl.

Fortune telling is not so difficult as some people imagine, for is it not true that

“Feathers show how the wind blows,
And straws tell how the current flows!”

And is it not also true that, in some shape, we have all our *straws* and *feathers*, which give to the observing and experienced such insight into our character, as enables them to foretell, with tolerable certainty, what will befall us in after-days? For instance, I never see a man spending his money and time in a public house, but I know that man is sowing dragon’s teeth, and will have a terrible harvest; nor do I ever see a woman neglecting her own household duties to gossip with her neighbors, but I know her children are not likely to call her blessed. I never see a young lad with a cigar or short pipe in his mouth, who has turned his back on the church or the Sunday-school, and can talk about his father as the “old governor,” and his mother as the “old woman,” trying to make himself look big by scoffing at things serious, but I know that young man is mixing a bitter cup for somebody, but one more bitter still for himself. Nor do I ever see a young woman decked in showy finery, trying to attract everybody’s notice, preferring Sunday walks to Sunday-schools, places

of amusement to places of worship, and foolish companions to fireside duties, but I am certain that sorrow is close at her heels. I know not how many books have been written on fortunetelling, but I know of one book that tells fortunes with amazing certainty; and in one passage it declares, that **WHAT WE SOW WE MUST ALSO REAP.** One illustration of this unerring truth, we give in the following narrative:

Some of my readers will remember that, in my younger years, I resided in a village just outside the town of Rochdale, called Cut-Gate. In this village there was one public house and two grocer's shops. One of these shops was kept by an elderly widow, of considerable energy and spirit; and, to help her in the business and household affairs, she obtained the assistance of a relative, a young female about nineteen or twenty years of age.

The appearance of this young woman in our rural hamlet, caused a little stir amongst its inhabitants; for in most villages, everybody knows everybody, looks after everybody, and minds everybody's business, sometimes better than their own. Had she gone to reside in some large town, she might have lived and died without her next-door neighbor knowing her name. But not so in our group of country cottages. We all soon knew that her aunt called her Nanny, and

The young women soon knew that she held her head a little above any of them, besides outstripping them in her style of dress; for she was often seen in light, showy gowns, curls or ringlets, and a large scalloped shell comb to fasten up her back hair. One or two girls, the most foolish in the village, bought large combs, and tried to curl their hair like Nanny, but none of them could compete with her. This caused not a little envy and mortification.

But it was not our females only that were influenced by the new arrival; for some of the young men began to pull up their shirt-collars, stretch down their coat-tails, and pay more than usual attention to the brushing of their hats and shoes, with a distant hope that they might not be entirely overlooked. After some time, one of these young men was seen arm in-arm with Nanny, taking a Sunday walk; and from that time it was generally understood that Robert and Nanny were engaged.

One fine Sunday afternoon, almost all the inhabitants of our village turned out to see what, perhaps, had never been seen amongst us before. Two horses, saddled and bridled, stood at the grocer's door, one with a lady's side-saddle on. While the children were gathered round the horses, and the villagers stood at their doors looking for the riders, out came Robert and

Nanny, both finer than we had ever seen them before. He had on a white waistcoat, and she a long, light dress and more curls than ever. He assisted her to mount, and both set off at a canter, quite astonishing every one of us; for all were looking on with open eyes and mouth. When they had got out of sight, one old woman exclaimed,—

“Well, that caps all! If Robert weds yon lass, drapers will have to give him long credit.”

“Yes,” replied another, “he will not need to go to old Thaniel to have his fortin toud. I con tell him mysel.”

“Has she oiy brass, I wonder?” observed the first speaker.

“Brass! Not her, indeed. I asked her aunt, and she said she was as poor as me; and I am poor enough, everybody knows,” replied the other. “Besides, what can *he* have? He is only a working man. Twice nought is nought, and nought will not keep folks on horseback.”

It was about this period that the circumstance took place which gives the title to this narrative. The cottage in which I resided was two doors from the grocer’s shop. One room next to the shop was used as a warehouse, and behind this room was a small place, called the parlor. One afternoon, when I was about seven years of age, I was helping in the warehouse, and was terri-

bly frightened by a loud scream in the little parlor. I ran to see the cause, and there stood Nanny, the very picture of despair, looking at a large lock of her hair that lay, along with the curling tongs, on the floor. Her aunt, having also heard the scream, came running to see what was the matter. Seeing the lock of hair on the floor, she began to scold her niece, declaring that, if she had been a minute, she had been two hours before the glass curling; and, if she lived, she would have something more to scream about than the loss of a few hairs from her head. Nanny, full of indignation, turned round to the glass, and began combing out her hair for a fresh start, minding, however, not to have the curling-tongs too hot the next time, lest she might burn off another precious curl.

Soon after this event, the village was all astir to gaze at a rather merry wedding party, going and returning from the church, and again the wise people were making their predictions. One old man wondered how long it was since either bride or bridegroom had been inside a church before; observing that he wished them much happiness, but something more than a wish was required to make people happy.

This merry wedding party was that of Robert and Nanny. I have no objection to people being merry; I like to see proper mirth and joy;

but I do think, if there be one day in our lives that is an important day, it is that on which we link our destiny with one who will be to us a blessing or a curse. A fiddling wedding is very often a foolish wedding.

For several months after the marriage, the young couple seemed all right, but it was remarked that Robert did not attend so well to his work as formerly. The reason of this was, he intended to change to some other business or trade, for his new wife did not think a blacksmith was sufficiently respectable; and at her persuasion he left the forge, and commenced business as a wholesale dealer in malt.

Respectable, indeed! Is not all useful labor respectable? Is there not a real dignity in such labor? Many a man, who, through pride, has left honorable employment for questionable speculation, after having his high notions rolled in the mud, has been glad to creep back to his true position. "Respectable is, as respectable does," is a maxim which applies to every grade of society.

Soon after entering into the malt trade, it was evident to all that knew Robert that a great change was coming over him. From being sprightly and cheerful, he became silent and thoughtful. To get custom, he spent much time in public houses, and this soon began to tell on

his appearance. He began to prefer the public house to his own. He was deficient in what all dealers in malt especially require—self-control; and very soon malt controlled him, as it has controlled millions. Oh, that malt! that malt! If one could collect the myriads of wretched children, whose pale faces are smitten by early sorrow, or stamped with the impress of early crime, and ask them why they are in rags, tatters, and tears, the answer would be “MALT!” If one could stand on the top of St. Paul’s, and shout with a voice that could be heard in every miserable home in England, and ask, “Why are you miserable?” the answer from thousands of breaking hearts would be “MALT!” Or if the same voice, turning to the hundreds of prisons, with their almostcountless ruined inmates, should ask why these pests of mankind are chained, behind locks, bolts, and bars, the response would be “MALT!” Or if we could stand on the brink of perdition, and ask the lost souls what brought them into that place of endless woe, the reply from doomed millions, like the roaring of many thunders, would be “MALT!” No tongue, no pen can ever describe what misery, ruin, sorrow, and crime MALT has produced.

Robert, finding he was sinking in health and circumstances, wished to give up his destructive business; but no! his proud wife would not hear

a word of it. For, though she knew that his credit was bad, still she kept up her style of dress and showy appearance ; and he, like many a poor, struggling husband, had a millstone hung round his neck, by a foolish, showy, proud wife ; as many a hard-working, honest father has been made to carry continual sorrow, through the extravagance and vanity of proud, showy daughters.

I have often been pained, both in our churches and chapels, by seeing the dignity, pomp, style, and evident self-admiration with which many of these gayly dressed females enter the house dedicated to humble devotion and prayer, as if God Almighty were indebted to them for coming, and to hear them afterwards descanting on the dresses, and especially the bonnets, of those that were present.

“ Did you see Mrs. and Miss Edwards at the church yesterday ? ” asks one.

“ Yes ; what style ! How did you like their bonnets ? ” asks another.

“ Not very well ; I don’t think peach trimmings suit her complexion ; mauve, or magenta would do much better.”

“ Did you see Mrs. Phillips ? She likes plenty of color in her trimmings. Is her husband doing much business ? ”

“ I don’t know, but I think he should be, for she costs no little to keep up her pomp, for

They have the longest bills
Who wear the most frills."

"What was the text on Sunday morning? for I have quite forgot," asks the first speaker.

"Well, you are as bad as me, for I don't remember the text, or much of the sermon, only it was something about the Jews."

This is only a small sample of what may be heard every week, from a class of persons who seem to consider the church as only a place for showing fashions; and it is quite time that ministers of the Gospel speak out on the question, for some of our sanctuaries are becoming places of gayety, almost as much as the ball-room.

While I do not believe in a religious dress, for I don't think religion consists in the shape of either coat, hat, or bonnet, yet I am persuaded that, as a rule, the dress is an indication of the mind.

If one quarter of the time was spent in adorning the heart, and in thoughtful preparation for the worship of the sanctuary, that is spent before the glass, in decking and adorning the frail, dying body, heaven would gain many precious souls that will never enter there; for, I firmly believe that many of our females think more about the shape of their bonnet, than the salvation of their soul.

Isaiah spake of such in his day. Walking with wanton eyes; mincing as they go; with chains, bracelets, and mufflers; head-bands, tablets, and

ear-rings ; mantles, wimples, and crisping pins. These had all their doom predicted. It came, and come it ever will, for "the Lord hateth a proud look." How immeasurably must such a tawdry thing be below the beauty mentioned by Paul, adorned in modest apparel ; not with broidered hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array, but with modesty and good works. Isaiah's mincers have ruined thousands; Paul's beauties never one. They are no expensive shams, but ornaments and blessings to every husband, every father, and every home. They are infinitely to be preferred, as wives, to mantles, wimples, and crisping-pins, and will be preferred by every sensible man. Well had it been for Robert had he chosen such a wife.

Robert's malt business was a failure. His circumstances became desperate, and, to escape from the consequence, he fled to America, leaving his wife to do as she could. No doubt he did wrong here, but people in desperate circumstances cannot always reason. After he left, the shop was broken up, her husband's father took the two children, and for many months Nanny lived amongst her few friends. But she was in good health, and, had she bent her mind to her circumstances, as noble souls ever will, she might have found some honorable way of earning her bread. This she was too proud to do, however.

Her friends, seeing this, one by one cast her off, and she was again left to fight her own battle.

She now removed to Bolton, and for some time was lost sight of. But it appears that her love of finery was still her ruling passion ; for, on reading the papers, many of us were startled by seeing an account of her imprisonment for stealing a shawl and a pair of boots. The evidence against her was so conclusive, that she was sent to Liverpool, there to await her trial at the assizes.

Poor Nanny, how sad was I when I heard of thy disgrace, thy dreadful fall, and thy impending fate. I could have wept, and gone to speak a word of comfort to thee ; for well I remembered how, in my boyish days, thou patted my young cheek, and gave me many a penny to take thy sealed letters to thy now self-banished husband. With my child's heart I loved thee, and thought thee a fine lady ; and when in my innocence, I picked up the hot tongs that burned off thy lost curl, I felt a wish to put back thy lock of hair, if I could have done so. As my young heart wished for thee then, so do I wish for thee now, that thou hadst gone to some dear place of worship, some house of prayer, and, in meekness of spirit, bowed before thy God, and sought peace with Him through Jesus Christ. He would have saved thee, and guarded thee, and, instead of being immured in thy silent, gloomy prison cell,

thou wouldst have been a happy child of God on earth, or a blessed saint in heaven.

The day of trial came : the heralds, lawyers, and jury came : and, with whatever indifference mere spectators may regard an assize day, to those whose fate hangs on that day, and whose hearts almost die within them when the trumpet sounds to tell the judge is coming, it is a very different thing. I have witnessed many such scenes, but never without remembering that another and a last trump will sound, and then the Judge will come to judge us all.

I have often thought of poor Nanny's condition on the day of her trial. It is pitiable enough to be imprisoned for crime, but it is sad indeed to be without one loving heart, or one single friend in the wide, wide world. To love, and to be loved, is true life. God is love, and the source of love ; and the more we love, and especially the more we love Him, the more we are like Him. The devil cannot love, and those who are most like the devil love the least.

When Nanny was brought from the cell to the dock, she held down her head in shame and sorrow. All eyes were fixed upon her, and when the counsel for the crown laid before the judge and jury the crushing evidence of her crime, there was no reply ; she had no one to defend her, and the verdict against her was " Guilty ! "

The judge lifted his head from a paper he was reading, and, in a voice of tenderness, said, "My young woman, have you any one in the court who can say anything in your favor?" No answer.

Again he asked, "Have you no one present to speak one word for you?" Nanny shook her head, but gave no answer.

A third time he asked, looking round the court, if there was no person that knew her, that could say anything in her behalf? Still no answer!

He paused for a moment, and then, in slow, distinct words, said, "My young woman, the sentence against you is, that you be transported beyond the sea for seven years."

One wild, piercing shriek, which sent a thrill of pain through the entire court, and Nanny fell senseless in the arms of the jailer.

Soon after she returned to consciousness, one of the prison officials, with a large pair of scissors in his hand, came to cut her hair to the length allowed by prison rules. Crash! crash! went the shears through her yet long, beautiful tresses, and the poor creature was made to look like a felon indeed; but she did not resent it—she did not complain, or shed one tear, while her hair was being cut away. Deep sorrow had entered her soul—she was humbled to the dust—she was meek as a little child. Did she now remember her aunt's prediction?

A few weeks after, the transport ship came, and the transport ship went. Many on board that ship had, like Nanny, darkened their future prospects by early follies and early crimes ; and, like her, were receiving the wages of sin, having inflicted on themselves and others unspeakable trouble. Oh, how many breaking hearts have followed the wake of the transport ship ! How many sobbing or wailing partings, never to meet again ! Early and continued piety would prevent these dreadful scenes. If none but the true Christian—the really religious—were imprisoned, transported, or hanged, every transport ship would rot, every prison would tumble into ruins, and the drop and beam of every gallows moulder to dust, before they would have one single soul for a victim.

We know little of poor, exiled Nanny after she left her native land ; only that she became very meek, obedient, and kind to every one, and that she made many friends on the passage out, and when she reached her destination. We also heard that she never smiled, but often read her Bible ; that her health failed her, and she gradually sunk into a comparatively early tomb. Her body now sleeps in a distant settlement and in a foreign grave, but we trust that her bruised soul, renewed by divine grace, is gone to where graves and penal settlements are unknown.

Poor Nanny! thou art not the only one that a foolish love of extravagant finery has dragged down to infamy and irretrievable ruin; thousands, like thee, have had to wail in after life, over character, friends, virtue, peace, and hope all gone—gone never to return, in this world. And yet, this fearful whirlpool is still sucking down its thousands, who are bent on indulging in this destructive infatuation. Would that thy example might prevent some poor, erring creature from following in thy fatal wake; then the object of this narrative will be answered.

Who communicated to Robert the intelligence of his wife's banishment we knew not, but we know he returned from America some time after she was gone. He was greatly changed, and changed for the worse—malt was still doing its dreadful work. He was never heard to mention his wife, or to make the slightest allusion to her; not even when madly raving under *delirium tremens*, as he often was. We also know that in one of these truly fearful conditions, with reeling reason and burning brain, he wandered wildly over a neighboring moor, where he had often played in his happy, innocent childhood, and in that frightful state of mind and body, he leaped into the deep, cold waters of Lumb, near the valley of Cheesden.

I have this day, October 27th, 1865, stood on

the bank from which, in his moment of madness he plunged into the dark, deep waters, and this day talked with his near neighbor, Henry Howarth, who often tried to calm him in those hours of madness, and who, after the inquest, brought his dead body to the house from which he helped to carry it to its last resting-place, about thirty feet from the centre of the east window, in the grave of his grandmother, in Spotland church-yard.

Poor Robert ! poor Nanny ! Silks and satins, mantles, wimples, crisping-pins, and malt have done their gloomy work for you, as they have done for thousands : and never, while memory lasts, shall I forget the lesson taught me by her who is the principal subject of this narrative. The prophecy of her aunt has been bitterly fulfilled—that prophecy uttered on the day Nanny screamed over her lock of hair, her burned Lost CURL.



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BY JOHN ASHWORTH.

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